

“Memorable Moment”

Aim. Focus. Shoot. The fondest memories of being in a war zone are the few precious moments when you can forget you are actually in one. One of my most cherished photographs from my time in Vietnam is this picture of a rag-tag group of children that I happened on one day when I was out looking for my Pulitzer Prize winning photo. I was hoping someday it might become iconic and grace the pages of Life Magazine. It didn't turn out that way. The photograph however has remained iconic for me. It was a tranquil, typically hot and lazy day in the war. It was a rare day off from duties in the Comm-center. Having been in-country for a respectable amount of time, I felt free to explore my surroundings in a relaxed and carefree manner. Armed only with my 35mm Yashica camera and a bandoleer of film canisters, I went out in search of subjects that I could document on film. My M-16 remained safely back in the arms room.

I explored the compound taking shots of the topography, bunkers, hootches, downed helicopters, guard towers and even a small improvised POW camp inside the base. I mostly wanted to document the images that I had tried to describe in my letters home. These pictures would be worth thousands of words. I finally ventured out of the compound into the countryside surrounding it. That is where I struck gold. I came across a group of kids who seemed to be part of a work detail. They were either on the way to work in the rice patties, or on the way home. I'm not even sure that the subject ever came up. My Vietnamese was very limited, as was their English and our communication was mostly physical. We shared a few pleasantries which would establish friendly intentions from both sides. Language is overrated. Smiles and gestures go a long way.

In the foreground are a group of kids along with their beast of burden either coming from or on the way to somewhere. The beast, and for the purposes of this narrative I will call WB, is a Water Buffalo. My mouth dropped open when I first laid eyes on him. I had never experienced a creature of this stature in my life except in the pages of National Geographic. Here he was, right in front of me and directly in the viewer of my camera. WB is flanked by the obvious leader of the group, a young

woman who seems to be in charge of the six beautiful children. She is dressed in traditional fashion, silk black pants, a loose fitting long cotton blouse, scarf and a large conical hat which would protect her from the hot sun. The kids wear a mishmash of non-traditional and mixed western style garb. She holds a forked stick in her hands obviously used to keep WB in line, as well as her entourage. She is not much older than them. They are all full of youthful exuberance. Their eyes have a look of promise and hope. Two of the boys though look slightly tentative and not quite trusting. As soon as I presented my camera they all fell immediately into place. They knew exactly what to do. I didn't have to stage a thing.

WB looks genuinely happy to be able to take a break from his duties and join in the fun. As for the children, for the most part, the smiles are genuine. There is some posing going on. There is a sweet look on their faces. One boy is sporting a jungle hat, while another boy, in an olive drab soft cap, smiles effusively. The wardrobe is obviously courtesy of US military surplus. Two of the boys are saluting and another flashing a peace sign which went right to the photographer's heart. The ladies with their signature conical hats hanging off their backs greet me with wide smiles that are trusting and open. There are two other boys who looked a bit perplexed and seem to be wary about the photographer and his intentions. They have subdued looks on their faces as they face the camera. They go along with the program in spite of their misgivings. Peer pressure, it's universal. Overall the group seems to be happy for a chance to take time out from the war and most of all their work obligations for the day.

The day was hot. It was always hot. The sun cast its perfect light on the subjects in the photo. No additional light apertures were needed. You almost could smell the grass burning from the heat of the midday sun. The pool of water on the left of the photo was rife with mosquitoes and the smells of sulfur in the stagnant water. WB was giving off his natural beastly smells. He wouldn't apologize for that. It smelled like Vietnam. It was as simple as that. In the background, you can faintly see some of WB's relatives or at least his fellow species hard at work. Above, there was always the drone of helicopters which we all had gotten used to at this

point. Nobody ever looked up and no one seemed alarmed. It was as natural as wind or thunder or rain or the faint sounds of artillery in the distance. It was a reminder that a war was still going on, but it didn't warrant any special acknowledgment. We all stayed in the moment.

The children in the photo just wanted to be normal. They wanted the war to be over and for the photographer to go back home. But before they sent him packing, they wanted him to give them something for their troubles and for being the stars of his iconic photo. They weren't in search of future royalties; they wanted to be compensated here and now. They weren't interested in chocolate. That was a different war. A few piasters or some MPC would do nicely and would compensate them for their time posing. The war had taught them something. After all, they were part of the struggle against communism. Their missing fathers had joined in the fight. They wanted their fathers to come back home. Capitalism was what we were selling and that's what they were buying.

I give them what I have, which is a some MPC and a few piasters that I had squirreled away in the deep recesses of my wallet. I was going to keep the piasters for souvenirs, but they were needed here. The MPC was as worthless as the paper it was printed on but it had buying power on the black market. These kids depended on the black market for survival. I wished I had more to give them. The look of gratitude and of genuine love and appreciation is the part that is not seen in the photo. That was the postscript. This is the aftermath of the story. That was their gift to the photographer. As I continue to study the photograph, I can only wish that they all had a chance to grow up, and maybe, just maybe, they would remember the photographer that they happened on all those years ago. He will never forget them.

—Leo, *New York City*